

**Testimony Before the Senate Finance Committee
February 7, 2024**

Senate Bill 813 – Health Care Facilities - Access to Telephones

**** Support ****

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Maryland Chapter (NASW-MD) Committee on Aging, we would like to express our support for Senate Bill 813 - Health Care Facilities- Access to Telephones.

As social workers who serve older adults in nursing homes, we support this bill because it will require nursing homes to provide residents reasonable access to a telephone. Entering a nursing home can be a stressful time for a resident and their loved ones. They are struggling with a change in health status and are in unfamiliar surroundings. Family may be unable to be there due to distance or the time of day. New admissions may come to the nursing home in the late evening or even through the night. A phone call from a familiar person or the ability to call a loved one might make all the difference in the resident settling in during the admission.

For residents, having regular access to those who are important to them, is essential for their well-being. This was especially evident during COVID when visitors were not allowed in nursing homes. The phone calls or Face Times reduced anxiety and brought comfort to both residents and their concerned family members.

The Code of Federal Regulations, Title 42 –Requirements for States and Long Term Care Facilities 483.10 reads “the facility must protect and facilitate that resident’s right to communicate with individuals and entities within and external to the facility, including the reasonable access to a telephone, including TTY and TDD services.” The regulations require that residents have a place where telephone calls can be made without being overheard.

Even with a federal regulation, some nursing homes still do not meet this requirement. The reasons are varied. Residents may change rooms, and phones do not always follow. Some nursing homes do not have enough telephones for each resident to have their own, while in others, each bed does not have a phone line or jack. For a long time, installing a phone was an additional expense that not every nursing home resident could afford.

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In nursing homes that provide residents with phones upon request, there might be a delay in maintenance staff installing a phone. A resident might be offered the use of a cell phone, but that requires them to ask already busy staff to take the time to bring the phone to them. Family members might be told to call the nurses' station when they want to speak with their loved one, but there is not always someone there to answer the call, or if they do, they may not have the time to stop what they are doing to take the phone to a resident's room.

Currently, residents are allowed to have cell phones in nursing homes at their own expense, which is an imperfect solution. Cell phones can be difficult to maintain in nursing homes because they need to be charged, and they are small and easy to misplace.

Residents of nursing homes and their loved ones need to be able to talk to each other. For many residents, their only means of communication with the outside world is their phone. Staying engaged with those who are important is a crucial part of addressing feelings of isolation. For a variety of reasons, some nursing homes find it difficult to be sure residents have reasonable access to a telephone. Senate Bill 813 would mean that, in every Maryland nursing home, residents can expect that access to a phone will be provided.

We ask that you support SB 813.

Respectfully,

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